

Managing Emergency Media Events

by

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Today the news is a 24 hour a day, globally reaching business that encompasses television, radio, newspapers and magazines. National and International news agencies, their reporters and cameramen are constantly searching for stories that may interest and inform the general public. The first step in developing an effective relationship with members of the news media is understanding the function of the press. Simply put, the press has the job of reporting the news to the public. With the advances in communications technology, news reporting has become nearly instantaneous, allowing the public to watch these stories as they unfold. The combination of dedicated news professionals and advanced news reporting technologies can almost guarantee an important news story is never out of reach of the camera's eye.

Incidents involving disasters, workplace violence, crime, or terrorism are usually considered important news stories and generally end up as headlines in all forms of the press. When such incidents occur, you can be assured that considerable news media resources would be mobilized to cover the story. It should also be easy to assume that news agencies would attempt to report such a story in as extensive detail as possible. This detailed coverage of the event could include; live reporting from the scene of the incident, live reporting from hospitals providing medical treatment for event casualties, interviews with Government officials, Law Enforcement, Fire Department and EMS officials, Medical personnel providing treatment, incident victims and their families, etc. With this reality in mind, it is necessary to conduct advance planning in the area of news media relations in order to be prepared to effectively manage such an event.

During crisis events, news media attention can become rather intrusive to say the least. It should be understood that news journalists will probably not be content with being stationed in an office awaiting information regarding the incident. It must be anticipated that journalists will aggressively seek out details of the event through methods such as interviewing and photo documentation. Corporations, along with their Security Departments, should have established policies and procedures for handling a news media event. These policies and procedures should be implemented to insure that key areas of importance, such as personnel safety, operational security, information confidentiality, and accurate information dissemination are addressed. The following are key points to consider when developing a plan for managing news media events:

The Goal of the Press

- News agencies and their journalists have the responsibility of gathering and reporting the news to the public. Personnel within the news media community take this responsibility very seriously. The act of reporting the news is not only considered a job, but a constitutional right and fundamental necessity for a well informed society.

Developing a Plan

- Policies and procedures regarding the news media must be developed in advance to insure proper handling of press matters during a crisis event. It is important that corporate management understand the mission of the press and anticipate extensive inquiries in the aftermath of a crisis situation.

- All policies and procedures regarding the dissemination of information to the press, as well as managing a press event should be produced in writing. Policies and procedures for granting and conducting interviews, as well as issuing press releases to news journalists should be emphasized.
- The company should establish dedicated spokespersons who are responsible for disseminating information to the press. This will allow for continuity of information being released by company officials.
- Consideration must be given to handling requests and/or attempts by news media personnel to gain access to sensitive or restricted areas of the facility. Press personnel should be escorted by a company representative while on the property.
- Staging areas on company property must be established for news media crews in advance. Consideration should be given to insuring that press personnel have the space necessary to operate without interfering with operations. This consideration is important if lengthy media coverage is anticipated. Access to electricity and telephones should be made available to news media personnel, within reason. Press personnel staging on public property outside the company's facility will be out of your control.
- Fact sheets containing background information regarding the company, its policies, and details regarding the current situation should be prepared by the public affairs office and given to media personnel. This will allow journalists to have current and reliable information in which to disseminate to the public. List information in a bulleted points format on the fact sheets.

Establishing the Rules

- Management must establish rules and parameters for managing a media event in advance. This should not be done with the goal of controlling the media, but maintaining a productive, accurate, and systematic dissemination of information.
- Obtain and verify the identities of press officials in advance. You have the right to know to whom you are speaking with and the agency they represent. Only speak to accredited members of the press.
- Insist on being treated courteously and with respect. Journalists may be assertive and ask tough questions, but their demeanor should not be threatening or abusive. Inappropriate behavior by journalists should not be tolerated.
- Reserve the right to control the time and location of all press releases and interviews. Consideration should be given to having media interactions recorded by company personnel.
- It should be remembered that press officials are not granted any special authority or rights to enter on private property, remain on private property or force persons to make statements. If press officials have entered into an area where their presence is not authorized, simply refer them to the Public Information Officer and ask them to leave. If they do not honor the request, notify local Law Enforcement for assistance.
- Reserve the right to terminate any press interaction if you feel the rules that have been established are being violated, or you feel journalists are becoming threatening or abusive.

Conducting Press Interviews

- During an actual incident, security staff members should refrain from granting press interviews. Because the security staff will most likely be busy with the task at hand, unnecessary distractions should be kept to a minimum. Request for information by media personnel should be referred to the Public Information Officer or the Information Officer operating through the Incident Command System (ICS). This should insure the continuity of accurate information dissemination throughout the event.
- If management grants the requests for interviews by journalists, these interviews should take place in an area away from the confusion of on-going operations. Concerns for the safety of personnel and emergency responders should take priority.
- When conducting interviews with media personnel speak only with accredited officials of the press.
- Know what the scope of the interview is about before granting it. Always approach the interview prepared. Gather all necessary background information, outline the key points we want to convey, rehearse delivering your answers if necessary. Be confident in your abilities as spokesperson.
- Pay attention to personal grooming. Dress appropriately for the interview. Watch your posture. If standing, stand up straight. If seated, sit up straight. Be aware of nervous gestures such as rubbing or scratching your nose, running your hands through your hair, rocking forwards and backwards, tilting your head to one side, crossing your arms, cracking your knuckles, etc.
- Limit interruptions during the interview by turning off pagers, two-way radios, or cellular telephones.
- Interviews with the press should not be considered conversations. The goal of the interview is to disseminate information to the public, the media is merely the conduit.
- Keep the interview simple. Avoid long or complex statements or explanations regarding facts of the event. Convey information in easily understood terminology. Attempt to limit your responses to under 30 seconds, the briefer the better.
- Remember that there is no such thing as an “off the record” statement. Anything that is said to a news journalist is subject to being used in a news report. Remember that you are being recorded.
- When answering questions always be truthful. Never attempt to manipulate the press by being dishonest, guessing at answers, distorting the facts, etc.
- Anticipate being asked difficult questions and prepare accordingly.
- Remember your role as spokesperson. Statements provided by you will be viewed as the official position of the organization.
- When providing statements cite the facts of the incident. Don’t play down the seriousness of the event. Refrain from including your personal opinions while answering questions, your opinion means nothing in the context of your role as spokesperson.
- Speak clearly and project your voice so you can be heard. Do not use technical jargon which

requires explanation. Use language that will be easily understood by the public.

- Conduct yourself as a professional representative of the organization. Be friendly and polite. Do not lose your temper, become defensive, or display frustration.
- When responding to questions, don't guess at answers. Do not answer questions that you shouldn't. If you are unable to answer a question adequately, refer the interviewer to the public relations office for the appropriate answers.
- Understand that you may become nervous and make mistakes. If you detect that you have made a statement in error, don't panic. Inform the interviewer that you may have answered a question in error and proceed to correct the statement.

The Issue of Etiquette

- It must be remembered that respect is a two-way street. If one expects to be treated fairly and courteously by media personnel, one must return the favor. All dealings with the news media must be handled in a professional, business-like manner.
- Professional journalists conduct themselves as such. Abusive behavior from media personnel should never be tolerated.
- Never ask to preview a news reporter's story. Generally, journalists will not allow persons, other than their editors, to review a story in advance.
- Company personnel, especially members of the security staff, should refrain from engaging in any altercations with press personnel. The situation may be stressful, but we must conduct ourselves as professionals.
- Never threaten, push, strike, or become abusive in any way, to a member of the press. This type of activity could result in civil law suits or criminal charges.
- Never place your hand over the lens of a news camera, grab a news camera, or attempt to obstruct, in any way, the camera's view. Actions such as these can be interpreted by the public as an attempt to conceal information.
- If you are asked a question and do not want to make a statement at that time, simply don't. Refrain from using terms such as "no comment", "I won't answer that", "I can't confirm that", etc. Statements like these are generally viewed by the public as an attempt to conceal information. Remember that sometimes silence can be the best response.
- Time constraints and editorial decisions may result in an abbreviated version of the interview when it appears in the news. Don't be disappointed if the entire interview is not presented to the public.
- If you find that you have been misquoted by the reporter, inform your public relations office. If necessary the reporter should be contacted and informed of the mistake.